

# analizy intersekcjonalne



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## Feminist Aliens, Memoirs from the Margins. A Caribbean “Feminist’s” Experience in Western Feminism

Feminist scholars from the developing world have long written about the fracture between Western and developing world feminisms, where women from the developing world are often depicted as one monolithic group of oppressed “third world” women by feminists from the West. I posit in this article that there is power in this depiction, which implicitly categorizes women from the developing world as “other” and this power allows Western feminisms to determine whose scholarship is relevant to the development of feminist epistemology. I also make the point that for feminist scholarship to grow there needs to be an acknowledgement that feminists from everywhere possess knowledge and experience which should be viewed as valuable contributions to feminism. I ask the question, can there be a shift in the way feminist knowledge is produced, one that can transcend the current boundaries and bring about solidarity in practice within feminism?

**Keywords:** Caribbean, developing world, feminist epistemologies, power

## Introduction

Over the years, there have been many debates within feminism. These debates have led to the emergence of different feminist epistemological perspectives, which examine knowledge and the position of the knower. One example of an early feminist epistemological debate within Western feminism can be seen in Sojourner Truth's fundamental challenge to all "ahistoric or essentialist notions of «woman»"<sup>1</sup> in her famous speech *Ain't I a Woman?*

Truth's words summed up the main elements of the debate on intersectionality and emphasised that "different dimensions of social life cannot be separated out into discrete and pure strands".<sup>2</sup> The intersectionality concept has tremendous relevance to me as a black woman from the Anglophone Caribbean, residing in the West. Here, my experiences are largely shaped by the combination of these identities, and I often experience multiple forms of discrimination within patriarchal society, based on who I am interacting with, and where, when and why these interactions occur. I therefore identify with Chandra Mohanty when she foregrounds the importance of experience but also notes the difficulty of theorising experience appropriately.<sup>3</sup> I also know that in the developing world there are many women like me, but, there are many with whom all I share is the biology of a woman and whose experiences are different but just as relevant to an overall feminist discourse. Caribbean feminists like Rhoda Reddock,<sup>4</sup> Patricia Mohammed,<sup>5</sup> Rawwida Baksh-Soodeen,<sup>6</sup> and Gemma Tang Nain<sup>7</sup> argue this point about the difference among women in the Anglophone Caribbean space alone,

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1 A. Brah, A. Phoenix, *Ain't I a Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality*, "Journal of International Women's Studies" 2004, no. 3, p. 76.

2 Ibid.

3 M. Nagel, *Chandra Talpade Mohanty. Review*, "Wagadu" 2004, no. 1, p. 2.

4 R. Reddock, *Conceptualizing 'Difference' in Caribbean Feminist Theory*, in: *New Caribbean Thought: A Reader*, eds. B. Meeks, F. Lindahl, Kingston 2001, p. 199.

5 P. Mohammed, *Towards Indigenous Feminist Theorizing in the Caribbean*, in: *Rethinking Caribbean Difference Historicizing Slavery/The Impact of the Global Environment/Illusions of Development/Gendered Testimonies*, ed. P. Mohammed, special issue, "Feminist Review" 1998, no. 59, p. 6–33.

6 R. Baksh-Soodeen, *Is There an International Feminism?*, "Alternative Approach" 1993, no. 24, p. 22–32.

7 G. Tang Nain, *Black Women, Sexism, and Racism: Black or Antiracist Feminism?*, "Feminist Review" 1991, no. 37, p. 1–22.

and advocate for a broader feminist discourse which focuses on each racial category of woman present in the Caribbean.

Yet for decades, this fact has seemingly escaped most Western feminists who have and continue to lump us into one monolithic category which they call the “third world woman”.<sup>8</sup> These “third world” women, apparently all experience the same conditions and are all “sexually repressed, tradition-bound, and uneducated ... in contrast to the educated, modern, autonomous, first world feminist”.<sup>9</sup> This “third world woman” is supposed to represent me, and yet when I read about her I fail to see me or my experiences and the experiences of many women I know from the Caribbean and other developing regions.

The “third world woman” according to Rita Felski, is presented as “part of a putative global sisterhood, yet mysteriously other, an exotic and enigmatic figure”.<sup>10</sup> She is viewed as “the ultimate proof of the universal nature of patriarchy and female bondage”.<sup>11</sup> This narrative, which has transcended feminist literature and permeated academia as sound theory, has been and is also currently used to formulate global policy and practice. Therefore, both the dynamics of global politics and Western feminist modes of representing women from the developing world, appear to reflect each other, where the “political attitudes of «center» states are mirrored in feminists attitudes toward women from «peripheral» states”.<sup>12</sup> Yet, many feminist scholars from the developing world do not identify with this image presented by Western feminists and have consistently critiqued this depiction as simplifying the plight of women in the developing world by homogenising their experiences.

Let me just state here before I run the risk of sounding universalist, not all Western feminisms and feminist scholars are guilty of distorting the identity and experiences of women in the developing world. There is Western scholarship which is very informative, advances the rights of women in the developing world and offers a very good analysis of what exists in some developing societies. However, for those scholars who fall

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8 I reject the term “third world” because of the negative images of economic dependence and poverty it invokes. As such I prefer the term “developing world” which though in many ways inaccurate, is a more palatable word bearing in mind the constraints of hegemonic language.

9 R. Felski, *The Doxa of Difference*, in: *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*, New York 2000, p. 125.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 M. Lazreg, *Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria*, “Feminist Studies” 1988, no. 1, p. 88.

into the former category, their depictions have very far reaching effects. These effects, according to Mohanty, are manifold. Firstly, it sets up a binary within feminism, which “codif[ies] others as non-Western”<sup>13</sup> and hence implicitly sets up Westerners as the ones who are the knowledge producers versus the non-Westerners who are the subjects of investigation. In essence, therefore, Western feminist scholarship has authority over women of the developing world in that it directly impacts how women in these regions are viewed more broadly and draws a solid line within global feminism, dividing those thought to be the researcher from the researched.

The effect of the division is made more visible with the growing cadre of feminist research and scholarship originating from the developing world. This scholarship, which analyses and theorises the multiple experiences of women therefrom, offers a rigorous and perceptive account of women’s lives, and is a valuable contribution to global feminist methodology and epistemology. This scholarship, which Audre Lorde wrote about in 1984 as consciousness absent from consideration,<sup>14</sup> is still today yet to be fully accepted by Western feminisms as a valuable contribution to the feminist academy, and these developing world scholars yet to be embraced. This is because knowledge is produced within an intellectual tradition with stated and unstated assumptions<sup>15</sup> and the depiction of the “third world woman” as a collective of women who in a fictional solidarity are sisters to Western feminists but who are also depicted as other, implicitly assumes that she is far removed from the hallowed halls of academia, and incapable of creating knowledge.

While Western feminist academics have long questioned traditional assumptions, they have neglected to investigate their own premises. As such, “academic feminisms have yet to break away from the philosophical and theoretical heritage it has so powerfully questioned”.<sup>16</sup> I therefore attempt in this article to show how Western feminist scholarship about women in the developing world is part of the “global hegemony of Western scholarship – i.e., the production, publication, distribution and consumption of information and ideas”,<sup>17</sup> and how this has implications for the development of feminist scholarship from

13 Ch. Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, “Boundary 2” 1984, no. 3, p. 334.

14 A. Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Trumansburg, NY 1984, p. 111.

15 M. Lazreg, *Feminism and Difference*, p. 88.

16 Ibid., p. 82.

17 Ch. Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes*, p. 336.

the developing world. The article demonstrates how a one-way flow of information has practical implications beyond the immediate feminist or disciplinary audience, and has had the effect of developing an ideology within Western feminisms which has in many instances effectively barred developing world feminist scholars from unifying with Western feminist academia.

To demonstrate the above, the works of several feminist scholars from the developing world are utilised. I conclude that for feminist academia to transcend its current contradictions, Western feminists must; acknowledge the position they hold in the process of global knowledge production, and acknowledge that with this position comes the responsibility of being accurate and nonbiased in their depiction of other women's conditions; grant feminists from the developing world the courtesy they have long been shown when they journeyed to their lands to study and analyse their cultures; dispense with the resistant attitude and acknowledge that scholarship produced by feminists from the developing world is a reliable source from which they can learn, which can be the focal point for change in the way feminism is practiced, and which can bring about a mending and help to further feminist scholarship that engages everyone.

## Western/White Feminist Epistemological Foundations

On a metatheoretical level, feminism has challenged foundationalist epistemologies to show how historically situated knowledge has been passed off as universal truths. However, according to Amanda Gouws, in its quest to address these inaccuracies, "feminism has created universal truths all of its own, and in terms of the constitution of the subject has often excluded women of colour"<sup>18</sup> and from the developing world. White standpoint feminist epistemology concerned with gender inequality has rightly critiqued the bias and disinterest of foundational epistemologies. By using women's lives as the starting point for creating certain knowledge claims, standpoint feminist epistemology has created a universal category of woman. In doing so, they have made certain ethnocentric claims which represent a minority of women, i.e., white, middle-class Western women, and these claims have essentially resulted in a negation as opposed to proper interrogation of a majority of women

18 A. Gouws, *Feminist Epistemology and Representation: The Impact of Post-Modernism and Post-Colonialism*, "Transformation" 1996, no. 30, p. 65.

who reside around the globe. The presumption of solidarity, “a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not exist”,<sup>19</sup> has led to the practice of exclusion. Therefore, the epistemological foundations of feminism “reflects the authority and standpoints of those who have power to control knowledge production and dictates to but also silences those who are not scientists.”<sup>20</sup>

The reality is that feminism cannot survive without a notion of “women” and therefore the category cannot be totally deconstructed. However, while feminist standpoint epistemology is a starting point for a richer and fuller understanding of gender discrimination, the consensus it tries to create “depends on the systematic exclusion of the voiceless”<sup>21</sup> and it cannot be that some must be silenced “in order that these representations prevail”.<sup>22</sup>

Postcolonial feminists reject the universal category “woman” and critique the results such categorisation produces. The criticism on an epistemological level is that this approach results in a “global hegemony of Western scholarship by producing (ethnocentric) universal knowledge which negates cross-cultural difference” where woman as an analytical category is treated as an already constituted group.<sup>23</sup> This has very grave consequences for feminists not from the West. Therefore, according to Anna Yeatman, there needs to be a “disrupting [of] the we-ness of the community of knowers and locating all knowledge-claims within the politics of contested domination”.<sup>24</sup>

## The Practical Results of Western Feminist Epistemological Assumptions

Marina Lazreg states of Western feminists, that they “operate on their own social and intellectual ground and under the unstated assumption that their societies are perfectible. In this respect, feminist critical practice takes on an air of normalcy. It appears as part of a reasonable project ...

19 A. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, p. 116.

20 A. Yeatman, *Postmodern Epistemological Politics and Social Science*, in: *Knowing the Difference*, eds. K. Lennon, M. Whitford, New York 1994, p. 189.

21 A. Gouws, *Feminist Epistemology*, p. 72.

22 A. Yeatman, *Postmodern Epistemological Politics*, p. 191.

23 A. Gouws, *Feminist Epistemology*, p. 72.

24 A. Yeatman, *Postmodern Epistemological Politics*, p. 192.



for greater gender equality”.<sup>25</sup> This method of practicing feminism, this status quo position taken by Western feminists, ultimately has consequences which reverberate throughout feminism globally. Chandra Mohanty in her article *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, states that Western feminists have long used “various textual strategies ... that codify others as non-Western and hence themselves as (implicitly) Western”.<sup>26</sup> This stems from an embedded assumption that they are “the primary referent in theory and praxis”.<sup>27</sup> And “[b]ecause language produces the reality it names”,<sup>28</sup> one can “trace a coherence of effects” of these written assumptions.<sup>29</sup> One of these effects, according to Norma Alarcon, is the fact that “Anglo-American feminism has appropriated the generic term for itself, leav[ing] many a woman ... having to call herself otherwise”.<sup>30</sup> The assumption therefore, effectively creates a global dichotomy within feminism and feminist scholarship resulting in the development of global feminism which has the tendency to “limit the possibility of coalitions among (usually White) Western feminists and ... feminists of color around the world”.<sup>31</sup>

According to Lazreg, the bias within feminism is evident “by the search of many feminists for the sensational” that “reinforces the notion of difference as objectified otherness”.<sup>32</sup> These “findings” pass for scholarship in the West, but as Lazreg aptly states, to what extent do these women do violence to the women they claim authority to write and speak about is a question that is seldom raised.<sup>33</sup> The issue here is that a lack of genuine engagement resulting from an epistemological assumption of solidarity leads to the exclusion of the real and diverse plights of women from the developing world from the Western feminist narrative, or, that when included, their struggles are called up for specific occasions and often times with grave inaccuracies and inconsistencies. The preoccupation with theorising developing world women without

25 M. Lazreg, *Feminism and Difference*, p. 81.

26 Ch. Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes*, p. 334.

27 Ibid.

28 M. Lazreg, *Feminism and Difference*, p. 87.

29 Ch. Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes*, p. 334.

30 N. Alarcon, *The Theoretical Subject(s) of This Bridge Called My Back and Anglo-American Feminism*, in: *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras*, ed. G. Anzaldúa, San Francisco 1990, p. 362.

31 Ch. Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes*, p. 334.

32 M. Lazreg, *Feminism and Difference*, p. 89.

33 Ibid.

any apparent interest in embracing their daily experiences outside of a specific institutional and political agenda, and the refusal to engage with their scholarship, results in privileging and exclusion. As such, Western feminist scholarship is rife with implicit assumptions of women from the developing world, stereotyping them as victims and not voices, as sufferers and not scholars. The wide global dissemination of this scholarship in turn stymies the development of feminist scholarship and research produced within the developing world and as such effectively bars developing world feminists from fully and equally participating in the knowledge production process in the West. As Audre Lorde puts it, it leaves us with “no real patterns for relating across our human differences as equals”.<sup>34</sup>

### The “Third World Woman”

Western feminists’ tendency in their writings and analysis is to homogenise a historically and culturally heterogeneous group of women, which they refer to as “third world women”. Their writings invoke images such as can be found in Mohanty’s *Feminism Without Borders*. There she states:

the veiled women, the powerful mother, the chaste virgin, the obedient wife ... [who] exist in universal, ahistorical splendor, setting in motion a colonialist discourse that exercises a very specific power in defining, coding, and maintaining existing First/Third World connections.<sup>35</sup>

Thereby, patriarchy in developing societies as represented by feminists from the West is apparently universal in mode, character and consequences. However, this is not the case, since – as Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo claims, “[m]ale dominance, though apparently universal, does not in actual behavioural terms assume a universal content or a universal shape”.<sup>36</sup> Recognising this allows one to understand therefore that women’s response to male dominance and patriarchal conditions which are present in their societies cannot be seen as universal. On the contrary, as Zimbalist states,

34 A. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, p. 115.

35 Ch. Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonising Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Durham–London 2003, p. 41.

36 M. Zimbalist Rosaldo, *The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-Cultural Understanding*, “Signs” 1980, no. 3, p. 394.

[f]or every cultural belief in female weakness [and] irrationality ... one can discover others which suggest the tenuousness of male claims and celebrate women for their productive roles, their sexuality or purity, their fertility or perhaps maternal strength. Male dominance, in short, does not inhere in any isolated and measurable set of omnipresent facts.<sup>37</sup>

When Western feminists, often times within the confines of predetermined theoretical and methodological parameters, attempt to homogenise women from the developing world, it results in them drawing flawed conclusions and making generally inappropriate recommendations for the problems they perceive that these women face, while also invoking and using derogatory images and references. According to Ethel Crowley, the “problem in Western feminist circles is that more time and effort is spent on ideological nit-picking than on the formulation of strategies to redress the problems they highlight.”<sup>38</sup> I would go even further and state that Western feminists cannot keep thinking that they alone can highlight problems and strategies to address these problems. If all problem finding and solving with regard to issues in the developing world are done by and within Western feminism alone, then this will continue to perpetuate a dichotomous situation which will continue to breed discord, disrespect, disengagement and distortion.

The image of the “third world woman” which is arbitrarily constructed and which, according to Mohanty, carries the “assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality on the one hand, and inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of Western scholarship on the ‘third world’ in the context of a world system dominated by the West on the other, characterises a sizable extent of Western feminist work on women in the developing world”.<sup>39</sup> In essence, according to Mohanty;

Western feminisms appropriate and ‘colonize’ the fundamental complexities and conflicts which characterize the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races and castes... It is in this process of homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the third world that power is exercised in much of recent Western feminist discourse, and this power needs to be defined and named.<sup>40</sup>

37 Ibid., p. 394.

38 E. Crowley, *Third World Women and the Inadequacies of Western Feminism*, “Trocaire Development Review” 1991, p. 48.

39 Ch. Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes*, p. 335.

40 Ibid.

Having created the “third world woman”, Western feminists have circulated this image within academia to the point where its perpetuation has influenced policy and practice both within and outside of academic institutions. These policies and practices then give way to a tradition which has the effect of creating further and deeper divisions within an already divided feminism. As such feminism has come to look a lot like traditional scholarship and has become a parody of the masculine academic tradition, what Jean Bethke Elshtain calls the “masculine cast” using the terms of “raw power ... with a feminist face—and voice”.<sup>41</sup>

The above becomes even more evident as developing world feminist academics can now more easily traverse geographical and class boundaries and access the tools to tell their own stories and build their theories to a much larger audience. Yet they continue to encounter barriers within feminism which have been perpetuated by years of scholarship now turned into a feminist culture and which permeates Western feminist academia and effectively results in the subordination of feminist academics from the developing world, in a discipline that is supposed to be advocating for global equality. It is in this sense then that “[t]he failure of academic feminists to recognize difference as a crucial strength”, according to Audre Lorde, “is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson. In our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower”.<sup>42</sup>

## Developing World Feminists at the Margins of Western Feminisms

For women in the developing world, the consciousness of womanhood coincides with the realisation that this womanhood has already been appropriated in one form or another by outsiders, persons who are held up as experts on knowing. In this sense, according to Lazreg, the feminist project in the developing world rarely brings with it the potential for personal liberation.<sup>43</sup> How can women from the developing world give voice to the unique experiences of women in their particular societies if their stories have already been told? If implicit in these already told stories is the idea that these women are unable to give voice to their

41 J.B. Elshtain, *Feminist Discourse and its Discontents: Language, Power and Meaning*, “Signs” 1982, no. 3, p. 611.

42 A. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, p. 112.

43 M. Lazreg, *Feminism and Difference*, p. 81.

own experiences because of their oppression, then how can women who have been rendered voiceless by a movement feel a connection to that movement, and what is/are the alternative/s?

In writing this article I hope that by giving voice to my experiences, I am not only demonstrating the considerable difference between me and women in the Anglo-American society within which I reside, but that I am also showing how misrepresenting, ignoring or tokenising this difference can result in my invisibility, the supposed irrelevance of my experiences, and the assumption that there is no legitimate place for my type of knowledge, my scholarship, within feminist academia. I am writing reflexively in a hope that it can spur Western feminisms to be more introspective and to critically examine assumptions that pass for objective knowledge and that influences divisive practices.

### Feminist Aliens: Memoirs from the Margins

As I noted earlier, as a feminist from the developing world I have always been conscious of the developed/developing world hierarchy which exists within feminism. However, once I migrated and became a part of the Caribbean Diaspora in the United States (U.S.), it became even clearer to me what I and my feminism meant to feminists here. I have been for a long time conscious that in the place where I reside my multiple identities often intersect in a way that can be very confusing, and therefore my “assimilation”, both personal and professional, is tumultuous. Most of my identities, black, female, and immigrant, are non-hegemonic, and so I often find myself in the margins within Western society. Despite this, however, I have always considered myself a feminist, and I am passionate about the principles feminism stands for. I also believe in education as a source of liberation, and I utilised my access to free education to secure not only class mobility but as a means of helping me to fully comprehend the complexity of societies and why some people are more privileged than others. This education resulted in a feminist awakening of sorts which led to an active pursuit of a deeper understanding of how humans interact with each other within society, and over the years my feminism has become such an integral part of me that it no longer describes the beliefs which I hold but really who I am. I am a feminist, right?

When I migrated to the U.S. a few years ago, I found myself questioning whether my feminism was authentic enough. I also found myself questioning my feminist education. Was it good enough? Was my

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developing world feminism, my developing world education and scholarship, substandard to that of Western feminist academics in the U.S.? If so why? And if not, why did I come to feel this way?

Upon migrating, I learned that U.S. law and policy dictates that those of us not born in the U.S. need to go through a process to become legal permanent residents where upon you are assigned an alien number once you reach the U.S. border. From that time onward my experience is that I have been made to feel like an alien in every facet of my daily life. The one place which I thought I would find comfort, the one group with whom I thought I could identify and find solace, would be the feminists. Despite our differences I believed that these women would understand or at least sympathize with my issues of identity and difference.

What I found in reality was far different. I encountered a feminist academia that is closely guarded and in some instances dismissive. In the years that I have been in the U.S., I have reached out to hundreds of feminists; white, black, latina, coloured, academics, grassroots, but after the initial calls and the polite conversations and the following up, I have been unable to penetrate the Western feminist academic and organizational barrier; I am still very much an outsider. As I have tried to become a part of the feminist network in the U.S., I have been asking the question, why I, a black, immigrant woman from the developing world, am finding it so difficult to “infiltrate” these networks, especially in academia? I find myself identifying more as an outsider/alien than as a feminist. Nothing had prepared me for the rejection which I have received from Western feminisms. Like U.S. feminists, I am committed to gender equity, but in this place, to them, I am a “third world woman”. At the time I did not understand the almost complete power that this Western feminists’ depiction of me carried and how this depiction in fact fuelled a resistance to embrace the knowledge and the scholarship which I brought to the discipline.

### Feminist Scholars from the Developing World and their Experience with Western Feminisms

The above experience however, did not deter me from practicing my feminism, though in isolation. I decided to conduct research which was focused on finding out whether there were other feminist scholars who may have had similar experiences with Western feminisms. Eventually, like Mohanty, I developed the desire to draw attention to the way the Western feminist gaze defines who can produce feminist knowledge

and to bring attention to the invisible barrier which has been created within feminism, which results not only in the exclusion of developing world feminist academics, but also has the effect of fracturing academic cohesion, distorting scholarship, and stymieing development within feminism itself.<sup>44</sup>

In my research I came across several feminist scholars who have long been discontented with Western feminisms' treatment of women from the developing world and who have also in one way or another experienced the power which the phrase "third world woman" has to relegate many developing world feminists to the margins.

### *Why I do not Call Myself a Feminist* – Madhu Kishwar

As I contemplated whether I really was a feminist after all, I read Madhu Kishwar's article published in *Manushi* entitled, "Why I do not Call Myself a Feminist".<sup>45</sup> According to Kishwar, the use of "feminism as a label does not guarantee anything... [i]t does not provide sufficiently significant information about people's perspective".<sup>46</sup> It is the action of people, their interactions and reactions to others, the work they produce that points to the perspectives they hold. As a woman from the developing world, Kishwar refused to call herself a feminist because as she stated

the general flow of ideas and of labels is one way ... in this overall context of a highly imbalanced power relation, feminism, as appropriated and defined by the West, has too often become a tool of cultural imperialism. The definitions, the terminology, the assumptions, even the issues, the forms of struggle and institutions are exported from West ... and too often we are expected to be the echo of what are assumed to be more advanced women's movements in the West.<sup>47</sup>

This became much clearer to me as I pondered my situation. I placed myself in Western feminists' shoes and realised that since tradition dictates that everything should flow from them to me, it was unfathomable that the flow would be altered and that I could bring anything of value

44 Ch. Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes*.

45 M. Kishwar, *Why I do not Call Myself a Feminist*, "Manushi" 1990, no. 61, p. 2–8.

46 Ibid., p. 8.

47 Ibid., p. 3.

to the West. This is similar to Kishwar's narrative about incidences where *Manushi* (as an instrument which Indian women and men could use to produce and disseminate knowledge about their society) came under attack by Western feminists who, because of their hegemonic position in the global hierarchy of knowledge production, believed that they possessed a legitimate position to determine what was and was not appropriate.

Therefore, legitimising feminist scholars from the developing world would open the door for serious self-interrogation by Western feminisms about the 'third world woman' they have created, and this may lead to a revelation that some of their scholarship is fundamentally flawed. Legitimising feminists from the developing world would mean that the ideas of the homogeneously oppressed "third world woman" must be rejected. Legitimising feminists from the developing world would displace Western feminists as the sole knowledge producers, and would give permission to not only accept credible scholarship from the developing world, but to also open up Western feminisms to rigorous study by these women currently viewed as "other". This idea must be terrifying, because while we in the developing world are accustomed to having our worlds thoroughly disrupted, criticized, scrutinized, dismissed and viewed with mistrust, they are not. In essence, to fully embrace me or any other feminist from the developing world would be to relinquish the power that comes with being the knowledge producers. By seeing me as a legitimate feminist would mean that Western feminists would not only have to engage me and see my positions as theoretically sound, but that they would also have to entertain the thought that I may have a better grasp than they on the issues that affect me and those from my culture.

Therefore like Kishwar, I have come to believe that my feminism is not looked upon as authentic enough to be embraced as scholarship, and my non-Western education is seen as not developed enough to be taken seriously to penetrate Western institutions of serious and rigorous feminist scholarship and research. These are institutions that boast centres of interdisciplinary focus, and programs which address issues of the intersection of race, gender, and transnational identity, which present academics with special knowledge and expertise in and about the "third world", including Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), and who, ironically, are more than willing to educate me on my experience as the homogenous female from the LAC region. After hundreds of applications, conversations, appointments, luncheons, dinners, lectures, you name it, the one thing that appears certain is that my feminism is inferior here.



## Subsumption<sup>48</sup> vs. Engagement: The experience of Audre Lorde, Ien Ang, and Chandra Mohanty

In the instances where feminist academics from the developing world have been able to penetrate Western feminist academia, the reality is that in most instances their scholarship becomes subsumed by the West and is given token acknowledgment. In 1979, Caribbean born feminist Audre Lorde, feeling her scholarship had been misused, wrote "An Open Letter to Mary Daly".<sup>49</sup> In this letter Lorde asked of Daly,

Have you read my work, and the work of other Black women, for what it could give you? Or did you hunt through only to find words ... And if so, then why not use our words to legitimize or illustrate the other places where we connect in our being and becoming?... This dismissal stands as a real block to communication between us. This block makes it far easier to turn away from you completely than to attempt to understand the thinking behind your choices. Should the next step be war between us, or separation? Assimilation within a solely western European herstory is not acceptable.<sup>50</sup>

In 1984, Audre Lorde again felt compelled to make this point after attending a conference where there was a noticeable absence of women of color, including those from the developing world. Lorde wrote, "[d]ifference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic".<sup>51</sup> She was adamant that while community was the foundation of liberation, that "community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist".<sup>52</sup> She asked, "Why weren't other women of Color found to participate in this conference ... Am I the only possible source of names of Black feminists?"<sup>53</sup> These questions which Lorde asked more than three decades ago brought to the fore the assimilative, tokenistic Western feminist politics which unfortunately still exists today.

48 The term subsumption used here must be differentiated from that described by Marx as the process whereby capital gradually transforms the social relations and modes of labour until they become thoroughly imbued with the nature and requirements of capital, and the labour process becomes subsumed under capital.

49 A. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, p. 66–71.

50 Ibid., p. 69.

51 Ibid., p. 111.

52 Ibid., p. 112.

53 Ibid., p. 113.

More recently, Ien Ang wrote of her experience within feminist academia states, “[a]s a woman of Chinese descent, I suddenly find myself in a position in which I can turn my ‘difference’ into intellectual and political capital, where ‘white’ feminists invite me to raise my ‘voice’, *qua* a non-white woman, and make myself heard”.<sup>54</sup> This was an opportunity for a feminist from the developing world to tell her own story, and the politics of assimilation, Ang notes, had given way to that of multiculturalism. Yet, as Rita Felski notices, “this seemingly benevolent attention to multiple voices is much less laudatory than it seems. Rather, white feminism appropriates difference in an unthinking, often imperialist fashion”.<sup>55</sup> This is in line with the structure of white, Western hegemony, which Ang defines as “the systemic consequence of a global historical development ... the expansion of European capitalist modernity throughout the world, resulting in the subsumption of all ‘other’ peoples to its economic, political and ideological logic and mode of operation”,<sup>56</sup> and which has long viewed difference with suspicion.<sup>57</sup> But because it has been highlighted as an issue within feminism, difference must be at least given its token attention and then subsumed. This has been seen previously within Western feminisms itself. For example, Anglo feminist readers of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*,<sup>58</sup> tend to appropriate and cite the work as an instance of difference between women, but then would simultaneously negate that difference by subsuming women of colour into the unitary category of woman which is supposed to be a common identifier even though they are counter identified.<sup>59</sup>

Western feminism’s dealings with difference is not to treat it as an opportunity to learn more about other women and societies, rather “difference is «dealt with» by absorbing it into an already existing feminist community without challenging the naturalized legitimacy of the community as a community”.<sup>60</sup> Not challenging this notion of community as Lorde

54 I. Ang, *I’m a Feminist but ... ‘Other’: Women and Postnational Identities*, in: *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West*, London 2001, p. 177.

55 R. Felski, *The Doxa of Difference*, p. 126.

56 I. Ang, *I’m a Feminist but ... ‘Other’*, p. 185.

57 A. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, p. 112.

58 Ch. Moraga, G. Andaldia, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Watertown, Mass. 1981.

59 N. Alarcon, *The Theoretical Subject(s) of This Bridge Called My Back*, p. 364.

60 I. Ang, *I’m a Feminist but ... ‘Other’*, p. 180.

had suggested, means that “non-white, non-Western women in «white/ Western» societies can only begin to speak with a hesitating «I’m a feminist, but ...», in which the meaning and substance of feminism itself become problematized”.<sup>61</sup> In order for there to be any real chance of change, for developing world feminists to feel engaged, then, according to Ang, feminism “will have to develop a self-conscious politics of partiality, and imagine itself as a ‘limited’ political home, which does not absorb difference within a pre-given and predefined space, but leaves room for ambivalence and ambiguity”.<sup>62</sup> If this is to be done then “white/ Western feminists too will have to detotalize their feminist identities and be compelled to say: ‘I’m a feminist, but ...’”.<sup>63</sup>

According to Felski, the way difference is presently addressed and thought about by Western feminist institutions is in “such benevolent terms as ‘recognition’, ‘understanding’ and ‘dialogue’”.<sup>64</sup> The problem with such terms is that they reveal an over confidence in the power and possibility of “open and honest communication to ‘overcome’ or ‘settle’ differences, of a power-free speech situation without interference by entrenched presumptions, sensitivities and pre-conceived ideas.”<sup>65</sup> According to Spelman, it is a faith in white feminists’ ability to listen, and not only to speak.<sup>66</sup>

The above points to a situation which shows that even when our experience finds a place in the classrooms and universities or becomes a resource for Western feminisms theory, there is a tendency to appropriate it, as Lorde and Ang stated, within the already existing feminist framework. There is a “tacking on” of material from feminists from the developing world without any note of its significance for feminist epistemology. As Jane Flax states, “[t]he suppression of these voices seems to be a necessary condition for the ... authority, coherence, and universality of [white feminists]”.<sup>67</sup> According to Spelman this is the reason the voices of feminists from the developing world are not heard. She asks, whether

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61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid., p. 178.

64 R. Felski, *The Doxa of Difference*, p. 117.

65 I. Ang, *I’m a Feminist but . . . ‘Other’*, p. 179.

66 E. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*, Boston 1988, p. 14.

67 J. Flax, *Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory*, in: *Feminism/Postmodernism (Thinking Gender)*, ed. L. Nicholson, New York 1990, p. 49.

we haven't heard from them before [is it] that they haven't spoken, or that we haven't listened . . . Are we really willing to hear anything and everything that they might have to say, or only what we don't find too disturbing? Are we prepared to hear what they say, even if it requires learning concepts or whole languages that we don't yet understand?<sup>68</sup>

For Chandra Mohanty, the central issue is not one of merely acknowledging or hearing difference:

rather, the more difficult question concerns the kind of difference that is acknowledged and engaged. Difference seen as benign variation (diversity), for instance, rather than as conflict, struggle, or the threat of disruption, bypasses power as well as history to suggest a harmonious, empty pluralism. On the other hand, difference defined as asymmetrical and incommensurate cultural spheres situated within hierarchies of domination and resistance cannot be accommodated within a discourse of 'harmony in diversity'.<sup>69</sup>

Speaking about her own experience Mohanty states that when she wrote "Under Western Eyes", she had just taken up a teaching position at a primarily white U.S. academic institution and that this deeply affected her writing at the time. She was determined "to make an intervention in this space in order to create a location for Third World, immigrant, and other marginalized scholars like [her]self who saw themselves erased or misrepresented within the dominant Euro-American feminist scholarship and their communities."<sup>70</sup> After almost two decades of teaching feminist studies in U.S. classrooms, it is clear to her "that the way we theorize experience, culture, and subjectivity in relation to histories, institutional practice, and collective struggles determines the kind of stories we tell in the classroom"<sup>71</sup>. And if these

varied stories are to be taught such that students learn to democratize rather than colonize the experiences of different spatially and temporally located communities of women ... narratives of historical experience are crucial to ... destabilize received truths and locate debate in the complexities and contradictions of historical life.<sup>72</sup>

68 E. Spelman, *Inessential Woman*, p. 163.

69 S.P. Mohanty, *The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On Beloved and the Postcolonial Condition*, "Cultural Critique" 1993, no. 24, p. 41–80.

70 Ch. Talpade Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes Revisited: Feminist Solidarity Through Anti-Capitalist Struggles*, "Signs" 2003, no. 2, p. 503–504.

71 Ibid., p. 524.

72 Ibid.

Mohanty warns against the subsumption of experience, that is, the appropriation of scholarship from feminists from the developing world into an already existing curriculum to further a Western feminist agenda without providing any real context to the history, relevance and significance of this scholarship to those who have produced it; and calls for what she refers to as realist theorisations which “explicitly link a historical materialist understanding of social location to the theorization of epistemic privilege and the construction of social identity” and which suggest the complexities of the narratives of traditionally marginalized people and societies not from a separationist perspective put in terms of relationality.<sup>73</sup>

The difference between Mohanty and I is that she was educated in the U.S. While I am not purporting that this has made a difference as to why I am not accepted and she has found a foothold, this difference may have contributed to her success in penetrating Western feminist academia and to say with satisfaction that she was “able to begin to open an intellectual space to Third World/immigrant women scholars”.<sup>74</sup> She states, “I no longer live simply under the gaze of Western eyes. I also live inside it and negotiate it every day”.<sup>75</sup> While this is Mohanty’s reality, and while she has made tremendous progress, there are still too few experiences like hers and far too many who can state otherwise – stories like mine, years since Mohanty started her work.

## Conclusion

“Representation is a contested terrain which involves ... epistemological issues, but the debate is seldom addressed on this level”.<sup>76</sup> Western feminism epistemology espouses a language of theoretical feminist solidarity while simultaneously giving Western women a privileged ontological status,<sup>77</sup> by ignoring “their built in privilege [to] define *woman* in terms of their own experience”,<sup>78</sup> and by stereotyping women and feminists from the developing world. The impact is that by creating binaries and misrepresentations, Western feminist epistemologies

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid., p. 503–504.

75 Ibid., p. 530.

76 A. Gouws, *Feminist Epistemology and Representation*, p. 65.

77 M. Lazreg, *Feminism and Difference*, p. 98.

78 A. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, p. 117.

are a caricature of the very foundational epistemologies they were meant to question. A steady diet of Western feminist scholarship that is based on “theoretical reductionism”<sup>79</sup> has resulted in an exclusionary feminist ideology, and because practice is clearly shaped by one’s own experiences and level of political education,<sup>80</sup> the result is that this “us and them” dichotomy clearly shows up in practice and daily feminist interactions. Such Eurocentric analytic paradigms continue to flourish within feminism and must be openly criticised for the effects on the lives and struggles of certain women.<sup>81</sup>

After years of observing and being on the receiving end of this practice, I am now very much aware that, as Felski claimed, “[t]he political interests and needs of women do not always move neatly in step with the various phases of academic feminist theory”<sup>82</sup> and currently feminist practice lags behind. At present, it appears that the implicit acknowledgment within Western feminist academia is on the one hand that women from the developing world are excluded from feminist theorising on the subject, and on the other that though excluded from theory, their experiences are read in the classroom and/or duly footnoted as a cosmetic way of making feminism appear inclusive. This is even while there have been in fact major developments in feminist theory in the developing world. To still see and theorise women in the developing world as the “third world woman” is essentialist, ignores historical changes and internal differences by privileging only the experiences that are common to everyone.<sup>83</sup> This simple distinction “bespeaks a lack of concern for the complexity of difference as well as a simplification of difference”.<sup>84</sup>

Feminists from the developing world who have long been stereotyped “shoulder a double burden, namely to work toward an epistemological break with the prevailing paradigm and to re-evaluate the structure of gender relations in [our] own societies”.<sup>85</sup> This requires reflecting on the roles that female intellectuals should play in effectively promoting women’s needs. We must also be reflexive in our scholarship as a way that shows up not what I can do for the betterment of feminism

79 G. Somjee, *Narrowing the Gender Gap*, Basingstoke–London 1989.

80 Ch. Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonising Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Durham–London 2003.

81 Ch. Talpade Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes Revisited*, p. 509.

82 R. Felski, *The Doxa of Difference*, p. 117.

83 S.P. Mohanty, *The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity*.

84 M. Lazreg, *Feminism and Difference*, p. 101.

85 Ibid.

and for feminist theory, but how the experience of other women can teach me, how I can learn from the experiences of women who are not like me and from their scholarship.

This experience has left me reflecting on the nature and specificity of U.S. feminist theory and on feminist identity. The extent to which, as Ang rightly suggested,

white self-exnomination permeates mainstream feminism should not be underestimated. It is a core, if unconscious, aspect of (white/Western) feminism, which appears unaware that even some of its apparently most straightforward ideas and beliefs reveal its embeddedness in particular orientations and tendencies derived from “white/Western” culture.<sup>86</sup>

It strips women from the developing world of “their existence as concrete historical subjects living, working, acting and fighting in particular societal circumstances, and [objectifies them] as a generalised, always-already oppressed ‘other woman’ against whom Western women become elevated as the self-professed avant-garde of liberated womanhood”.<sup>87</sup> However, the voice of the other must be “taken seriously in its distinctiveness and specificity, [and] cannot be assimilated into a new, more totalised feminist truth”.<sup>88</sup> Other women can represent their struggles and triumphs, and this representation should work to disrupt the unity of ‘women’ as the foundation for feminism.<sup>89</sup>

While unlike Madhu Kishwar I still call myself a feminist, I presently claim no feminist affiliation. I started my journey seeking a space within feminist academia in the West, but the reality is that this was a fool’s mission. I have also since come to question my ability to represent or theorise women from the Caribbean and the developing world and, like Satya Mohanty, I find myself asking, “[w]ho can be trusted to represent the real interests of the group without fear of betrayal or misrepresentation?”<sup>90</sup> The question is not whether I/we as developing world feminists can penetrate Western feminist academia, but how do I/we define a critical writing space within which we can feel comfortable and justified and within which others can identify? To find our own space frees us of the restrictions of current feminist scholarship which,

We must also be reflexive in our scholarship as a way that shows up not what I can do for the betterment of feminism and for feminist theory, but how the experience of other women can teach me, how I can learn from the experiences of women who are not like me and from their scholarship

86 I. Ang, *I’m a Feminist but ... ‘Other’*, p. 179.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid.

90 S.P. Mohanty, *The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity*.

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With that said, feminism as a movement can no longer simply focus on resolving differences as the end goal, because resolving differences suggests, as Kirby wrote, that “their containment in an inclusive, encompassing structure which itself remains uninterrogated; it would mean that ‘these differences must comply with feminism’s ... essentialising frame’”.<sup>92</sup> In such a case, difference is ‘dealt with’ by absorbing it into an already existing feminist community without challenging the naturalised legitimacy and status of that community. My experience has shown me how that can be alienating.

Casting a glance back, however, I have accepted that this has been a crucial journey; my failure to reach Western feminists was the starting point for me to appreciate a more modest feminism, one which is “predicated on the fundamental limits to the very idea of sisterhood (and thus the category ‘women’) and on the necessary partiality of the project of feminism as such”.<sup>93</sup>

91 M. Lazreg, *Feminism and Difference*, p. 102.

92 V. Kirby, *Feminisms and Postmodernisms: Anthropology and the Management of Difference*, “Anthropological Quarterly” 1993, no. 3, p. 127–133.

93 I. Ang, *I’m a Feminist but ... ‘Other’*, p. 192.





wieniach niejawnie kategoryzuje kobiety ze świata rozwijającego się jako „inne” i tym samym umożliwia zachodnim feminizmom określanie, czyja wiedza jest odpowiednia w kontekście rozwijania feministycznej epistemologii. Podkreślam również, że dla rozwoju nauki feministycznej konieczne jest uznanie, że feministki z każdego zakątka świata posiadają wiedzę i doświadczenie, które powinny być postrzegane jako wartościowy wkład w feminizm. W swoim artykule stawiam pytanie o to, czy może dojść do zmiany w sposobach wytwarzania wiedzy feministycznej, zmiany umożliwiającej przekroczenie obecnych ograniczeń i wprowadzenie solidarności w praktyki feministyczne.

**Słowa kluczowe:** epistemologie feministyczne, Karaiby, kraje rozwijające się, władza